

From:
Courtney P. Stockland
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To:
DC Office of Zoning
Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 200S, Washington, DC 20001
Re: Letter in Opposition to the proposed upzoning from MU4 to MU10
of 1617 U St. NW & 1620 V St. NW (Sq. 175, Lots 826 & 827) - Ward 1
Case 23-02
Transmitted via email to dcoz@dc.gov

Monday February 26, 2024

Dear Chairman Hood and esteemed colleagues,

My name is Courtney Stockland and my family and I are proud residents of Seaton Street NW, which as you know dead-ends into the parcel of city-owned land under consideration in Case 23-02. We have lived here and in adjacent neighborhoods since 2002. We participated in the VA Home Loan program to buy our fixer upper rowhouse and have since put in a ton of sweat equity to make it the home we adore today.

The written testimony I submit today is of similar perspective to the oral testimony I gave on February 12, though I will try to not repeat myself as to respect your time. I am grateful for the opportunity to expand on some of the threads that may be helpful to the Zoning Commission, and have included some very recent factual contextual updates as well.

Chairman Hood I appreciate the independence and thoughtfulness you and your colleagues bring to these meetings and to this case. It is a welcome contrast to the folks we have been trying to work with from the administration and our ANCs for the last year once we uncovered the Covid-era change to the Comprehensive Plan, FLUM, and subsequent plans to drastically upzone land that currently hosts vital public safety services for our historic neighborhood, with the stated intention of leasing the land to a private developer for 99 years in order to build a 12 story rental apartment building on the site.

Commissioner Brienne Nadeau, ANC Chair Sabel Harris, OP's representative (Typically Mr. Jones, though this role seems to change often), DMPED's Mr. Jonathan Kirschenbaum, and others, once questioned about these actions and plans, have made apathy-sowing statements about this case such as "This is a slam dunk", "Split-zoning is not a thing" and regarding where the police and fire stations would be relocated to, a terrifying comment by Commissioner Nadeau: "Thankfully, that's not my problem."

While these attitudes and comments may intend to garner a defeatist response from citizens, I refuse to be resigned to this upzoning being a foregone conclusion, especially now that your independent and common-sense-full Commission is on the case.

I have summarized below what I see as the main issues with this case that, in my opinion, should lead to a disapproval of the MU10 rezoning request:

- The proposed upzoning and by-right building size that is being suggested by the city would be **completely out of scale and character with the surrounding Strivers' Section historic neighborhood**
- There has been a total **lack of proactive community engagement**; all topical meetings and 'noise' were community-grown until the Zoning hearings, with marginalized communities having to self-organize and learn of city actions and intentions haphazardly
- There has been a total **lack of displacement and other technical studies**, in spite of having been requested by ANC Commissioners and others in an approval-vote-contingent fashion

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- The idea for this plot was originated before we had **twenty million square feet of vacant office space** downtown
- The idea for this plot was originated before case sponsor Commissioner Nadeau was facing an **official recall effort** based on her soft-on-crime policies. **OP confirmed** in one of your earlier meetings **the police and fire stations are _not_ guaranteed** or even likely to return to the same location, and Commissioner Nadeau’s “not my problem” stance on the temporary or future permanent location of the stations shows the unlikelihood of these services remaining in the neighborhood if this upzoning were to be approved, given the intentions of the sponsors of this case for this land.

Instead of being wedded to an idea that was cooked up in the middle of Covid three years ago by a now-vulnerable politician, **it would be prudent to reconsider the basis of this case based on the data, facts and situation we have in front of us today.** The city’s focus should be on converting existing downtown vacant office spaces to housing, to not shutting down the only police station within miles, and to not be endeavoring to give away public land to private for-profit corporations.

The reality is, this is an absurd grab of our public land and the suggested post-upzoned development would be conspicuously out of character with the neighborhood. Drastically rezoning such a large parcel of public land, that currently houses a rather new fire station and a police station that is vital to the community particularly during this rather unfettered crime spree, in order to host a 12 story rental apartment building operated by a private developer, when nearly the entirety of the immediate neighbors and beyond are 2 and 3 story historic row homes, would be an **urban development tragedy. This is perhaps the _least_ creative and useful approach to this land.**

Allowing this parcel to be upzoned, especially so drastically, would be a collective legacy mistake. Our community would be the ones stuck with the ramifications of this upzoning and subsequent Cairo-style monstrosity of a generic rental apartment building that only benefits the private developer who will be given a 99 year lease—de facto ownership. Not the politicians that may or may not win re-election in a few years—or even survive a current recall effort underway. Not the hard working civil servants who live elsewhere. And certainly not the developer-backed, pro-endless-development folks who live in neighboring suburban states and who are encouraged and sometimes paid to flood the record with rather anonymous letters and remarks of supposed support.

This is the Wrong Site, Wrong Size, Wrong Use, and Wrong Time.

This final section of my letter intends to paint a bit more of a personal picture of our neighborhood where is site resides, and the changes we have seen in the last decade or so.

When we moved in over a decade ago, our street was bookended by a robust collection of locally owned small businesses on Florida Avenue—Pleasant Pops that sold handmade popsicles and coffee and was proudly owned by young Black&Queer women, And Beige that sold chic gifts and home decor, a sneaker store where a diverse crowd of folks would line up overnight to catch the latest style, Mint gym and spa, and Red White and Basil—a neighbor-owned and operated Italian bistro that catered to a variety of budgets. On the other end of the street is the fire station and police station—services that help sustain the community during a prolonged crime spree like we are experiencing currently.

The combination of a diverse small business scene coupled with robust city services, all of which are appropriately sized for the community—is a Best in Class model for urban neighborhoods.

In recent years though, those small business were crushed during covid and their California-based landlord took the opportunity to kick them out of the historic rounded storefronts and replace the entire strip with none other

than a bright red CVS that installed car-sized black metal planters on the public sidewalk, planted vegetation in them but never watered them, and we are therefore left with a chain drug store that is redundant and therefore of little value, attracts thieves often, and is surrounded by giant mulch-covered cigarette receptacles. Not an upgrade for our community—just a classic tale of a greedy landlord who values nothing other than the highest bidder. Greed may have an appropriate place in the private sector of a lightly regulated capitalist society, but it certainly can come at a cost to a community, and should not be what a government prioritizes over other values that enrich a community.

Those shops and restaurants weren't only where the community could grab a coffee, a dinner out, or a hostess gift, but really they were gathering places, community-building vessels, and certainly an oasis to us during our extended closing and renovation processes. On U Street nearby we still have Henry's Soul Café—a legendary institution known for their sweet potato pie. And on 17th Street we have Hana Japanese Market, which opens up the community to unique groceries and prepared foods from Japan. Hana is situated in a strip of rowhouses that faces the police station, and was once owned by Frederick Douglass.

If the city upzones this plot from MU4 to MU10—an over 250% increase in allowable height and density—they will be falling into the same trap of that California landlord. Greed that is outweighing values and aspects of our community that we, the adjacent neighbors, have valued for decades. Small, quaint, historic housing, businesses, and services, that are right-sized for this truly special community. Cynics will say we are special just like everyone else, but if you spend any time in person on Seaton Street perusing our little free library and mini food pantry, smelling Arleen and Hussain's vibrant pink climbing roses down the street, melt at little white puff ball pup Poppy prancing down the street, read and learn from the historical marker about the Strivers' Section and Frederick Douglasses' local stake, or grab some shrimp shumai from Hana or a slice of pie from Henry's—you'll understand why MU10 is a terrible set-up for overdevelopment of this plot and would be a mistake that would negatively impact the community for more than a century. We would lose all of the historic nature of the neighborhoods that we have been able to preserve to date. Please don't enable others' greed. **Please be prudent and value our neighborhood as we already do—as an historic, quaint, appropriately-sized community.**

Upzoning with the known intention of giving away scarce and valuable public land to a private developer to build a high rise rental apartment building, with no guarantee the city services will be rebuilt on the site, is unwise no matter the political reasoning or agenda. And we shouldn't be under any spell that this isn't what is going on here. **Thank you very much to the Chair and colleagues—your work is valued and more important than you may know to our neighborhood.**

With respect and hope,
Courtney Stockland
